

Soc 4012 The RAID

P- Schemmer, Benjamin F.

CIA 4 S. Vietnam (Sontay)

Chronicling the Sontay 'Failure'

Reviewed by

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The reviewer is a Washington-based journalist.

"The raid on Sontay was an archetypal event of the Vietnam war," Benjamin Schemmer tells us at the start of this account of the unsuccessful attempt to rescue American POWs from North Vietnam. It is archetypal for Schemmer because it was "a complex political and military operation that encompassed the ponderous bureaucracy of the Pentagon and the White House, the sometimes counterproductive rivalry between America's various intelligence agencies, meticulous planning and training, and, finally, the incredible bravery of the men who carried out the mission." A more critical observer might add that the raid was archetypal because, like so much else in that war, it came up empty-handed: The prisoners weren't there.

But it is not Schemmer's intention to criticize. "No one needs to apologize for the 'failure' at Sontay," he writes, and Schemmer need not apologize for this book despite its literary failings. He has given us what probably is the most authoritative account of the Sontay raid that we will ever have—a considerable achievement since it involves the revelation of intelligence secrets that usually take decades to surface.

If only his editor had been as good as his sources. He would have toned down Schemmer's "For Men Only" writing style, spared us clichés like "as useful as teats on a bull" and cut back on details like the exact retail price of a chain saw carried by the raiders.

In the midst of these and other distractions, Schemmer informs us that:

- The American prisoners held at the Sontay prison camp 20 miles outside of Hanoi were moved to another

prison four months before the November 1970 raid, probably because of flooding caused by the Pentagon's top secret rainmaking project.

- Senior intelligence officials knew both from aerial reconnaissance and from an agent inside Hanoi that the prisoners had been moved but could not bring themselves to cancel the raid.

It is slightly more ambiguous than that—the aerial photographs showed that Sontay had been reoccupied by someone—they didn't know who—and the reliability of the Hanoi agent had not been previously tested. Nevertheless, Schemmer quotes one of the raid's planners as saying "the evidence was overwhelming" that the prisoners weren't there. The evidence was ignored because, as Brig. Gen. Donald Blackburn, the man who directed the raid from the Pentagon, confesses, "I didn't want to know. I wanted to go. I was looking for any straw I could find to keep the mission alive. I wanted to demonstrate that we could get in there and pull their chain."

And pull the chain they did. The 59 raiders, all volunteers, achieved total surprise, killed 100 to 200 enemy soldiers without losing a man, and were gone in 30 minutes.

Schemmer tells it all—from the code the prisoners used to call for a rescue mission, to the White House awards ceremony for which it was decreed that one of the raiders to be singled out for honors must be black. Schemmer, who is the editor of *Armed Forces Journal*, clearly gained the confidence of those directly involved in the planning and execution of the raid. The only document he had access to was the official "After Action Report," portions of which he obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. That document, at least the part which has been released,

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THE RAID

By Benjamin F. Schemmer

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gives a thorough account of the mechanics of the raid—where the helicopters landed, what the raiders wore—but is totally inadequate, even misleading, when it comes to the crucial question of what the Pentagon knew about the prisoners' whereabouts.

The report makes no mention of the North Vietnamese official who corroborated the accuracy of aerial photos showing that the prisoners had been moved. Schemmer not only describes in detail how this information was passed to the United States but identifies the official by name. (If that official is still alive and in Vietnam, his future will not be a bright one after this book is published.)

Some of the things Schemmer has been told are truly shocking. We learn, for instance, that 45 Vietnamese agents the United States had infiltrated into North Vietnam were simply abandoned, in some cases left to die of starvation, after President Johnson ordered the 1968 bombing halt.

We cannot tell to what extent Schemmer has allowed himself to be used by his sources. He certainly has bought the proposition that the raid was a good idea—prisoners or no prisoners. Another author in possession of the same information could have written a scathing critique of how top Pentagon officials needlessly risked the lives of American soldiers.

But it is Schemmer who possesses the information, and we cannot begrudge him his point of view, even though what he seems to be saying is: "The patient died but the operation was a success."